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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: KADUNA ON EDGE AS COMMON GRAVE IS EXHUMED:
WERE ARRESTED STRIKERS MURDERED?

REF: ABUJA 1761 AND PREVIOUS

1. (U) On October 18, Kaduna residents tried to exhume 10 to 19 bodies from a common grave in a Kaduna cemetery. Police had allegedly buried the bodies that morning. Residents of the area believed the bodies were of activists who had been arrested during last week's fuel strike (reftel). The Kaduna State Governor claimed that they were "armed robbers" killed in a shootout. Area residents have threatened to kill any policemen seen in the neighborhood. Police and Nigerian Army units have strengthened security measures, but have not imposed any curfew or restricted movement.

2. (SBU) Residents said that they noticed a police truck arriving at the Muslim cemetery in the early morning hours, and then (after the police left) unearthed the grave. BBC interviewed a man who claimed to be the father of one of the victims. The man said he had carried food to his son, arrested during the strike, at the police station the day prior to the discovery of the grave where his son's body was found.

3. (SBU) Kaduna State Governor Makarfi appealed for calm, announcing that he would set up a panel to investigate the incident, together with the killing of a 12-year-old boy during the strike. After initially denying any knowledge, the Kaduna State Police Commissioner repeated the "armed robbers" story but denied any police involvement at all with the grave: "Police do not engage in the burial of dead robbers. This is the sole responsibility of mortuary/local government personnel."

Comment

4. (SBU) Police often claim those they kill were "armed robbers." While armed robbery is indeed a problem in Nigeria, such claims often do not stand up to scrutiny. Makarfi's prior announcement that the bodies were of "armed robbers" may make the panel's investigation perfunctory.

CAMPBELL